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AESCHYLUS: AGAMEMNON

NEW YORK:
LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO

THE AGAMEMNON OF AESCHYLUS

TRANSLATED BY

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OXFORD
B. H. BLACKWELL
BROAD STREET
1919

882.01
AESCHYLUS

p. 18, l. 23, *for* sure *read* sore.
p. 29, l. 29, *for* varieties *read* vanities.

PREFACE

THE *Agamemnon* has already been translated into English verse many times. Aeschylus, however, has a broad enough back to carry many translators, and his meaning will not soon be exhausted by the multitude of those who try to reproduce it.

I can lay no claim to the original scholarship which would throw light on dark places of the text; still less to the command of diction which would enable me to represent in English the wealth of poetic utterance with which the more gorgeous passages of the poem gleam. I have limited my ambitions to a smaller compass. I have tried to produce a readable version that may enable the English student of ancient poetry to gather something of the philosophy and the religion of this the greatest work of one of the greatest Greek thinkers; and I have also more especially tried, by my choice of metre and rhythm, to reproduce something of the dramatic movement of the poem; for example, in the great Cassandra scene, I have sought to convey the transition from broken, half-articulate sobs and cries of horror, through the climax of terror and passion, to the lyrical sweetness of lament and self-pity, till song clears itself into speech of calm prophecy, and steadfast resignation to a cruel but inevitable fate.

I hope that within my limitations I have been reasonably faithful to the spirit of Aeschylus; but where I have wronged him, as all translators must, by missing the majesty of his poetry, I hope I have not added to

the wrong by too pedantically clinging to a verbal equivalence which would produce a result neither Greek nor yet English. The obscurity of Aeschylus is the giant's robe; to claim that an English translation of him must be obscure likewise is to demand the robe without the giant. I would have allowed myself something of his obscurity if I could have obtained some of the magnificence which is its excuse; failing in that, I have tried to be lucid.

I have bound myself by no theory in my selection of metres for the lyrics, but have left the subject-matter to choose its own, in accordance with its own qualities of speed, dignity, or incisiveness. I think I have only once violated the antistrophic arrangement, where the antistrophe needed two more lines than the strophe. For the interpretation I have drawn upon the editions of Sidgwick, Verrall, and Headlam. I have the profoundest respect for the patient scholarship of the last, but in one or two places I feel he has allowed verbal subtlety to obscure poetic or dramatic probability. There is always a danger that intensive scholarship may cause its possessor "not to see the wood for the trees." From that danger I at least am free; and if I have fallen into the opposite fault as is only too probable, there are many that will point it out.

My thanks are due to Mr. Frank Fletcher, Head Master of Charterhouse, for reading the translation in MS., and for many valuable suggestions which I have endeavoured to adopt.

R. K. D.

INTRODUCTION

THE SUBJECT-MATTER AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE PLAY

THE *Agamemnon* is a great dramatic poem whose theme is War, public and private, and the spiritual pride of which war is alike the issue and the cause. The conflict which gives to the work its dramatic power is, however, no conflict between individuals: it is the eternal enmity between what the Greeks called "hybris," and we sometimes call militarism, sometimes jingoism, and, nowadays especially, "the Prussian spirit," and the higher spirit of humanity which the best men of all ages have identified with their religion.

The play itself does not bring this conflict to its issue; being only the first member of a Trilogy, it merely states the problem to which the conflict gives rise, and ends on a note of gloom, for the solution is not yet in sight. But the aim of the poet was to justify the ways of God to man; and he does so in the third play of the series, the *Eumenides*, where we are shown, established upon earth, vested in a solemn tribunal of the State which stood pre-eminently for civilization and religion over against the barbarian world, for whom might was right—a tribunal sanctified by the abiding presence of awful yet kindly spirits of judgment,—that Divine Authority who leads men in wisdom's ways and brings their self-willed natures through suffering to peace. Till human institutions are an embodiment of the law of the spiritual universe; till God's kingdom is established upon earth whether

it be upon the Holy Hill of Zion or of Athens, so long will the pride of power and the insolence of success and the mad lust of vengeance lure men from sin to sin and draw victim after victim to disaster. That is the lesson of the Trilogy of which the *Agamemnon* is the opening play.

Consequently in the *Agamemnon* itself we see the powers of evil triumphant. We are shown a picture of a world in which, not justice, but vengeance reigns; in which sin brings punishment indeed, but punishment does not bring peace. Critics speak sometimes of the "curse of the House of Atreus"; but the curse is upon all the world—upon Priam and his house as well as upon the Greeks—and it is no unreal phantom of superstition, no haunting malignant spirit, no fatality beyond the scope of human wills. It is the selfishness of man, checked neither by reverence for Divine order nor by sympathy for human suffering. Priam and Paris, Helen and Clytaemnestra, Thyestes, Atreus, Agamemnon, Aegisthus, all alike are victims of self-will. Each of them plays for a great stake and wins; but as each has sought his success in defiance of Heaven, each is in turn overthrown by the very power that he had invoked. Satan is divided against Satan, and his kingdom cannot stand; and the lesson of the fall of these strong and mighty ones is read for us by the weak: by Cassandra, the one innocent sufferer who goes steadfastly to meet the fate she has foreseen but has done nothing to deserve, and by the chorus of aged citizens, whose hearts from the outset forebode the disasters which they are powerless to avert.

It is to the chorus that we must look mainly for the lessons which the poet wishes to convey. It is essential

that their teaching should be clearly understood, and it has often been misinterpreted. In the first place they are concerned to reject two popular theories of the relation between God and man, two common forms of fatalism. One is that prosperity itself calls down the thunderbolts of Divine jealousy. This theory they state but to reject in lines 750-762, and they are careful to guard against it elsewhere in discussing the part played by riches in tempting men to their ruin. It was a common superstition in the ancient world, and is exemplified in the well-known stories of Croesus and Polycrates. The second theory is that human beings can be so " possessed " by a half-personified " Curse " or " Fury " as to lose their individual responsibility. This view is put forward in her own defence by Clytaemnestra (lines 1497 fol.), and is instantly repudiated by the chorus. The old guilt of the House of Atreus may have helped to bring about the tragedy, they say; it may have suggested the new crime, it may have provided the incitement and the occasion, but no more. Zeus holds each man answerable for his deeds. " The doer shall suffer " applies to Clytaemnestra as it applied to Agamemnon, though he too sought to escape his responsibility by putting in the plea of the " yoke of necessity."

" The doer shall suffer " : that is the first ordinance of Zeus; and the second is, " The sufferer shall learn." In this second law is seen the germ of hope. Unfortunately, in too many cases the suffering gives no time for the lesson to be put into practice; and in this play it is only the powerless who learn from the sufferings of others. Yet the cure lies in the recognition of the lesson by the world at large, until the

principle of vengeance is laid to rest, or rather taken up into the larger principle of justice, and the infernal furies become the ministers and guardians of the heaven-descended court of judgment.

It would not be difficult to apply the lesson to the events of to-day. The avenging spirits bid us seek to exact the penalty for the deeds of "hybris" that have stained our civilization; but vengeance cannot bring peace unless vengeance is tamed, and made to serve some new international Areopagus: some judgment-seat of the citizens of the world, where reigns, not the spirit of the blood-feud, but the spirit of Divine Justice, and where the casting vote shall be on the side of Mercy.

Of the characters of the drama I shall say nothing. They can speak for themselves, even, I hope, in a translation. But it is perhaps worth while to remind the reader that Aeschylus was a soldier, and bid him, in view of that fact, study what the poet has to say on war. The scene of the Trojan War has been revisited by soldiers not long since, and it is an interesting task to compare the picture given by the messenger in the play, of warfare at the Dardanelles with the experiences of those who have fought there in these last days. Doubtless these latter will recognize the details: the stifling heat of summer, the winter's cold; the damp of the trenches, and the vermin: for many of them, too, *ἐχθρὰ δ'ἔχοντας ἔκρυψεν* remains the proud epitaph, and their mourners as well as those that survive may find in Aeschylus one who knew the sorrow as well as the glory of war, and may appreciate the truth of his warning to the lords of war:

Τῶν πολυκτόνων γὰρ οὐκ ἄσκοποι θεοί.

AGAMEMNON

SCENE : *The front of the palace of the Atreidae at Argos.*

TIME : *Night, shortly before dawn. A watchman is discovered upon the palace roof.*

WATCHMAN.

Heaven grant these toils an ending ! So I pray
Through all my year of watching, as I lie
Even here, upon the Atreidae's palace roof,
Dog-fashion, head on paw !
(*Pauses and gazes upwards*) How well I know
Yon stars, the assembly of the courts of Night,
And those bright Lords, resplendent in the heaven,
That send us mortals cold and summer heat !
(*With a sigh*) Stars ? Ay, the settings and the risings of them !
But now 'tis for a beacon flame I watch,
A glint of light that brings a word from Troy,
With news of capture : so our lady wills it :
Man's prudence—but a woman's eager heart !
Thus, like a vagrant on my dewy bed,
With ne'er a dream for visitor—for still
Fear hovers round me in the place of sleep,
Nor lets me close a lid in sleep secure—

When I am minded for to croon a lay,
And banish slumber with a stoup o' song,
Why, then come tears for this old house's fortune
That thrives not in its doings as of old.
But now come better luck, with toil's release,
And the fire flash good tidings through the gloom!

[*As if in response to his prayer, he sees a distant flame mount up on the Arachnaean hill.*

O hail, night's lamp! hail, dayspring from the dark!
How many a bout of dancing shall be set
In Argos town to celebrate this gleam!
(*Crying aloud*) Halloa! Halloa!
To Agamemnon's queen I cry aloud,
That, rising from her bed within the palace,
She haste to lift the triumph shout, to greet
This signal-fire—if truly Ilion's town
Be fallen, as yon beacon-flame would tell—
And I myself will start the dance's measure.
(*Dancing.*) The dice have given my master sixes three,
'Tis a good throw, and shrewdly will I play it.
(*Pausing, as if struck by a grave thought.*) Well! May this hand of mine be spared to clasp
My master's gracious hand on his return!
Of all else—silence! For upon my tongue
Treads a great ox! Only, if walls could speak,
This house would talk, as plain as you might wish!
For me, I'll tell you gladly—if you know!
But if you know not—then—I have forgotten!

[*Exit.*

Enter CHORUS *of Argive Elders, chanting as they go; they were past service ten years ago, and are now feeble with age, and lean upon their staves as they walk.*

CHORUS.

Years are ten that the prince defied,
Menelaus, and at his side
Agamemnon, of God's good grace
Throned and sceptred in equal place,
Atreus' children, a valiant pair,
Launched at the pride of Priam's lair
Ships a thousand, an Argive band
Strong in the strife of spears to stand.
Called from these wide dominions:
Hymning in wrath the Lord of Strife,
As eagles, fierce for the lost young life,
The rifled eyry, the love-brood lost,
The barren labour and all the cost,
Over the lonely crags on high
Wheeling, utter an anguished cry
To the stroke of the tireless pinions.

And lo, in the heavens One hath heard—
Pan or Zeus or Apollo—
The wild complaint of the stricken bird,
The wingèd stranger at Heaven's high gate.
In the track of Sin, with the sword of Fate,
The Avenger's footsteps follow.

Thus the Almighty, the Stranger's Friend,
Who to the bitter strife doth send,
Paris to smite, the Atreidae twain,
For a woman of whom the world was fain—
Wrestlings many of limbs outworn,
Knees in the clogging sand upborne,

Shafts in the first fierce onset riven,
These to Trojan and Greek hath given.
[*Altar-fires begin to gleam through the darkness.*
Fares the strife as the strife may fare,
Still to the end it speedeth.
Flames to kindle and wine to pour,
Tears to weep can atone no more
For the fires unlit and the unspoke prayer
And the wrath of One that heedeth.

But we, the aged, our old thews lost,
Scorned and left of that hero-host,
Lingering, guide on our staves upborne
The frail child's steps of a man outworn ;
For the Lord of Strife, he hath no part
In the young green blood of the sapling's heart,
And the aged stock with its leaves decayed,
Even as a child lacks strength to aid.
Stayed on a staff he wends his way,
A wandering dream in the light of day.
[*During this song the flames have been kindled on all the altars of the town. The* Chorus *gather in front of the palace-door and call upon the Queen to appear.*
Speak, Tyndareus' royal seed,
Clytaemnestra ! What news ? What need ?
Borne by what hand, what tale inspires
The heavenward faith of the holy fires
That leap at thy queenly pleasure ?
Lo, each guardian deity,
Under the earth or throned on high—
Gods of the portal, gods of the mart—
Sees from his altar the gift-flame start.

Lamp upon lamp they scale the skies,
Lured by the sinless witcheries,
The soft beguiling of unguents poured,
The rich nard-clots from the inmost hoard
Of the house of the royal treasure.
Speak, what thou canst and mayst impart!
Speak, and cleanse from my troubled heart
This malady long-dated.
For grievous now on my breast it lies,
And hope anon from the sacrifice
Rising joyous, hath chased amain
The gnawing doubt and the ravening pain
And the hunger still unsated!

[*During the ode which follows, darkness gives place to dawn.*

Empowered am I to chant
The might of augury
Upon the way to the avengers given:
For still about me breathes a wind from Heaven,
The spell of minstrelsy:
Fulness of years such guerdon still doth grant.

Then tell my words
How Argos' twin-throned lords,
Concordant rulers of that hero-band,
With arm and spear vindictive orderèd,
By ravening birds were sped
Against the Teucrian land:
King of the air above to earth-born king—
All sable, one, with argent tipp'd his mate—
From skies serene on the spear-side issuing,
Hard by the palace-gate.

A leveret brood unkindled they devour,
Torn from the womb, no fields thenceforth in flight
to scour.
(Then weep and wail ! weep and wail !
Yet blessing still prevail !)

Then the army's trusted seer
That marked the well-matched twain
Knew in the feasting birds the lords of fight,
The sons of Atreus, marshallers of might :
And in prophetic strain
Thus spake he : " Lo, in the appointed year,
This tramping host brings down
Its quarry, Priam's town.
And all within her battlements that hath breath,
Yea, all the mighty city's gathered store,
Fate at the last gives o'er
To violence and death.
But may Troy's mailèd curb not feel the power,
A host untimely smitten, of heavenly ire !
For holy Artemis in wrath looks down
On the winged hounds of her Sire,
That with its unborn young devote the hapless hare ;
And pities their wild doom, and loathes the eagles' fare.
(Then weep and wail ! weep and wail !
Yet blessing still prevail !)

" Ah, Fair One, though thy heart be fain
Of the fierce lion's brood, the cubs dew-tender,
Joying in all young living things that drain
The teat of mother-beasts in the fields that wander,
Yet be thou gracious to fulfil
Such auguries as would befriend us,

And shield us from the ill
That boding birds portend us!
O Healer, unto thee, with prayer for aid
I call, that ne'er by her contriving
The Achaean ships may feel, at anchorage stayed,
The unseasonable winds against them ever driving,
The while she urges some new lawless rite
Of sacrifice by feasting all uncrowned,
A fount of feud undying, strong to smite
The liege lord to the ground:
For dread, resurgent, ravening on the race,
Guileful, unsleeping, borne from sire to son
Abides the anger of the Injured One."

Thus in clear tone did Calchas trace
The omens of the birds upon the way,
And many a blessing therewithal did read
For the royal seed;
Whose strain to suit sing "Well-a-day!
Weep and wail! weep and wail!
Yet blessing still prevail!"

Zeus, whosoe'er he be, if in his eyes
This name hath any grace,
To him I call.
No other lord my eager heart descries
To worship in his place
Though it scan all,
If from my mind I fain would cast
This load of idle care, and win to peace at last.

That mighty one of old, in pride full-flown
And bold for every fight—
His tale is o'er!

And his successor, matched and overthrown
By one of worthier might,
Is seen no more.
But who with glad heart lifts the strain
Of Zeus triumphant, he shall wisdom's title gain.

'Tis He in Wisdom's ways hath led
Mortals : 'tis He that law ordained
That Wisdom be through suffering gained,
And still in dreams upon his bed
Man's heart with memory's bitter dew doth steep.
For Prudence knocketh at the reluctant breast :
Who without pains the grace of God can wrest
Who won through pains the dreadful throne they keep ?

Thus he, by right of birth the king
O'er ships Achaean, with naught of blame
For aught of prophet lips that came,
Bowed him to Fortune's buffeting ;
While the Achaean folk in drear delay
Were land-bound, and the famine plagued them sore,
Still gazing on the face of Chalcis' shore
Over the surge of Aulis' foam-washed bay.

For Strymon's winds brought loathèd idleness,
Hunger and evil harbourage, ships' decay,
Cables that rotted, crews that stole away ;
And weary hours were doubled, and the stress
Wilted the flower of Greece from day to day.
Yet harsher than the angry waves
In kingly ears, the prophet's cry
Voiced the ordainèd remedy.
Such tale of Artemis he told
That Atreus' sons, with anguished staves
Smiting the earth, their tears no longer might withhold.

Then, when words came, thus spake the elder king :
" Hard is the path for them that disobey,
Yet this my child, light of my home, to slay,
Her father's hands at the altar reddening
With maiden blood—were this the easier way ?

Then, since no path hath aught of calm,
Let me not act the runaway,
My fleet, my comrades to betray !
Good cause is theirs, I know, to crave,
Yea, bitterly, the tempest's balm,
The maiden's blood. So be it ! May Heaven the issue save !"

He spake, and bowed his head, and all was over :
Changed were the winds, that blew about his heart !
Unsanctified, unblest, ungodly tempests,
Bearing him on to dare the villain part.
For boldness is her gift, and sin her teaching,
First-born of Hell, the frenzied soul's Despair.
So for the wanton's war, the fleet's releasing,
Waxed he a daughter's sacrifice to dare.

Pleadings and cries of " Father !" nought they heeded,
Each warrior judge, nor girlhood's voiceless plea,
But when the prayers were said, he bade them lift her
O'er the altar high, nor flinch from what should be.
Like kid of the flock on high to hold her swooning,
Her robes about her, like a drooping flower,
And press the lovely lips, lest these avail her
Or speak of judgment in that awful hour.

Bridled her lips and silent as they held her,
Low on the earth her crocus raiment lies;
Flashed to each murderer's heart a shaft of pity,
The pictured eloquence of those burning eyes.
Fain would she speak to them; for at the banquet
Oft mid the guests her maiden voice she'd raise
Melodious, when about her father's table
The third libation brought the hymn of praise.

How can I tell what followed, I that saw not?
The craft of Calchas fails not of its goal.
Who suffereth, learneth: Justice holds the balance,
And they that wait shall read the story whole.
Let be, nor weep ere woes be ripe for weeping,
Clear shall the issue shine with dawning day.
Yea, let the Fates forbear, and grant her gladness
Our close defence, this Apian land's sole stay.

[*During the last lines dawn breaks. The Queen comes forth from the palace, as if to greet it. The* Chorus *turn and salute her, and their leader speaks.*

Leader of Chorus.

I come, O Queen, in duty to thy rule,
For when the throne is vacant of a prince,
The ruler's helpmate claims our fealty.
But wouldst thou tell if aught of certainty
Inspires thee thus to kindle sacrifice
For hope of tidings fair, I fain would learn;
Yet in thy silence will I rest content.

CLYTAEMNESTRA (*advancing and turning to the sunrise*).

Yea, with fair tidings, as the proverb runs,
Let morning issue from the womb of night!
But here is joy more great than hope can give;
The Argive host hath taken Priam's town.

LEADER OF CHORUS.

What sayest thou?
The words are fled: I dare not trust mine ears.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

The Greeks have captured Ilion. Is it plain?

LEADER OF CHORUS.

Ah, Joy, thy gentle onset wrings a tear!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Yea, 'tis a loyal heart thine eye betrays.

LEADER OF CHORUS.

But canst thou give us token?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Yea, I can.
If Gods be worthy trust.

LEADER OF CHORUS.

Is it some dream,
Some false and flattering vision of the night?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Nay, for I scorn a slumberer's phantasies.

LEADER OF CHORUS.

Feeds, then, thy heart on man's unsoaring speech?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Count you my wit no better than a babe's ?

LEADER OF CHORUS.

When was the city sacked, if sacked it be ?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

In that same night that brought this dawn to birth.

LEADER OF CHORUS.

And who the courier that could speed so swift ?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Hephaistos, a bright beam from Ida sending.
And beacon unto beacon passed the sign,
Speeding each fiery post. First Ida to the Crag
Of Hermes upon Lemnos sent. The isle
Upraised a mighty torch, that Athos caught,
Third of the line, and set Zeus' mount ablaze.
Then did the flame, a lusty voyager,
Leap joyously across the sea's broad back,
And, like the gold sun dawning o'er the deep,
Kindled with radiant beam Makistos' cliffs.
No laggard he, nor with bemusing sleep
O'erladen : but he bare his courier-part,
And far his torch-flame flashed the signal on
To them that watched above Euripus' waves,
Messapian warders : they with answering fires
Furthered the news : their pile of withered heath
Blazed upward proudly ; and the undimmed flare
Leaped o'er Asopus' flats, like the bright moon

To wake his fellow on Cithaeron's hill,
And speed the message onward. Watchers there
Spurned not the far-sent fire, but heaven-high
On his triumphal progress bore the torch;
And o'er the creek Gorgopis shot the light
To Aegiplanctus' mountain, where its beam
Woke fresh fulfilment of the ordinance;
For, kindling the fierce fires' unstinted strength,
A mighty flaming beard they sent aloft,
To blaze across the headland that looks down
O'er seas Saronic : whence the blazon swooped
Until it lighted on Arachne's hill,
Our neighbouring sentinel height. From thence it flashed
Even here upon the Atreidae's palace roof,
A beam of lineage bright from Ida's blaze.
So was the torch-race run that I ordained,
Each from his fellow bearing still his meed,
For first and last alike bear victory !
And such the token and the proof I give,
My Lord's own message, borne from Troy to me.

Leader of Chorus.

O Queen, to the Gods anon my prayers shall rise.
But this thy tale, with wonder still unsated,
Again, if thou wouldst tell it, I could hear.

Clytaemnestra.

This day the Achaeans are the lords of Troy !
And small accord, methinks, is in those voices
That ring about the city. Pour together,
In the selfsame vessel, oil and vinegar,

And mark how churlishly they stand apart!
So of the captive and the conqueror
The cries no better than the fortunes blend.
For these about the bodies of the slain,
Husband or brother, falling—yes, and children
About the aged forms that gave them life—
Utter their plaints from throats no longer free
O'er their dear dead: while those, by want constrained
After the roving battles of the night,
Break now their fast with what the town affords,
Waiting nor turn nor token. Even as each
In Fortune's urn hath dipped, they make their homes
In captive Trojan dwellings, safe at last
From frosts and dews of heaven. There shall they lie
In blissful sleep secure the whole night long.
Ah, if they reverence well the guards divine
That hold the land they have taken, and the shrines
Of deities august, they need not fear
Lest they, the spoilers, prove anon the spoiled!
God grant no passion seize upon the host,
No mastering greed to ravish things forbid!
For need is theirs of a safe home-coming,
And half of the double course is yet to run;
And though they issue pure in the sight of Heaven,
Yet from the dead may slumbering woes awake
To smite them, so no chance blow strike them down
Such are the fears that haunt my woman's heart.
But still, may good prevail, past cavilling,
For many a hope I'd sacrifice to this!

LEADER OF CHORUS.

Nay, a man's wit thy gracious words reveal,
O Queen; and I that hear thy tokens sure

Meet adoration to the Gods would frame
Who all our labours have with glory graced.

[*Exit* CLYTAEMNESTRA.

[*The* CHORUS *uplift a song of thanksgiving to Zeus, who has punished the wicked pair who slighted His laws. Their thoughts turn to the evil brought by Paris and Helen upon all Greece, and the murmurings to which the war has given rise. The joyous ode ends on a note of gloomy foreboding. Agamemnon's victory, after all, is a triumph of proud Might, not of heavenly Justice: and the end of troubles is not yet.*

O royal Zeus, O gracious night
  Enriched with glorious spoils!
Thou on the towers of Troy hast cast
The net close-meshed: no man of might,
No babe among them all hath passed
Forth from the deadly toils.

O jealous Lord of host and guest
  I magnify Thy power!
For long o'er Paris' guilty head
Thy vengeful shaft to the bow was pressed,
Nor erring o'er the stars it sped,
  Nor idly, ere the hour.

Thine is the stroke, Thine arm they own.
'Tis plain to trace: Thy will was done.
Said one, "The heavens disdain to heed
The mortal 'neath whose guilty tread
Fair flowers of holiness are trampled down."

Blasphemer! Fallen is their pride
Who breathed forth slaughter, who defied
Justice, whose halls beyond the measure
Of righteousness o'erflowed with treasure.
Ah, with no surfeit of success.
Unto the wise, come modest happiness!

For wealth is but a vain defence
For him that spurneth from his sight
The mighty altar-stone of Right
In paths of insolence.

But Vain Hope driveth him with dreams,
Child of the Curse that sleepless schemes.
No cure avails, but plain to all
The lurid beacon o'er his fall,
The quenchless beacon of disaster gleams.

For like base metal, at the touch
His hollow bravery shows the smutch.
A child the winged lure pursuing
Of Hope, he works his land's undoing
No God shall hear him though he pray;
The partners of his guilt are purged away.

E'en such was Paris, who in pride
To the halls of the Atreidae came,
And stained the welcoming board with shame,
And stole away the bride.

Unto her folk she left for legacy
The ring of spear on shield, the ships' array;
Ruin she bore to Troy for her dowry,
As lightly through the gates she sped away,

Past venture venturing : and with many a groan
The prophets of the palace made their moan.

" Ah, for the home, the home, the chieftain proud,
The couch that mocks him with love's void impress !
Behold him, how he sits in loneliness
In patient, unrebuking silence bowed,
While for desire of one beyond the deep
Still o'er the house her wraith its rule shall keep !
For hateful to the husband's sight
The shapely statue's carved delight,
And all of fair and gracious dies
Before the hunger of his eyes.

" But in his dreams come piteous phantasies,
Visions of night that bring their boons in vain,
For vain it is when dreaming heart descries
Its bliss, and grasps it but to lose again !
Fled is her form, no tryst thenceforth to keep,
Borne on the wings that haunt the ways of sleep."

Such are the hearthside sorrows of her home
That she hath wrought ; yea, these and more than these.
But they that followed from the lands of Greece,
Unto the house of each of them is come
Sorrow of them that bear the watcher's part,
And many a wound that pierceth to the heart.
The dear live forms of those they sped,
They know them well : and in their stead
Unto the house of each one nought
Save ashes and the urn is brought.

For Ares, trafficker in death,
Who holds his scales 'mid fields of strife,
All charred from Ilion bartereth
Ashes for flesh, and dust for life :
With brief and bitter freight doth fill
Each slender urn, that men may tell
How *this* was wise in warrior skill,
How *this* in battle nobly fell—
" All for another's lady light !"
Though hushed the murmurs, all may hear,
And stifled wrath and hate requite
The lords that bought revenge so dear.
And some, that lie in Trojan mould
About the ramparts where they fell,
Far hence, in fadeless beauty hold
O'er foemen's earth their sentinel.

Bitter the city's words of hate !
A people's curse therein doth dwell,
And still with brooding heart I wait
To hear some deed of night and hell.
For mighty slayers are marked on high,
And dark avengers to the ground
Hurl him in sure mischance to lie
Whom chance, not righteousness, hath crowned.
Unfriended in the dark he lies,
And bitter is his swoln renown
When on the pride of kingly eyes
The shaft of God comes blinding down.
May wealth be mine secure from spite,
No conquered cities feel my sword,
Nor may these eyes behold the light
Of slavery 'neath an alien lord.

The fire that bears good augury
  Hath sped a voice about the town ;
  But of its truth what man hath known ?
How if it be Heaven's mockery ?

  Who is so childish, who of mind so crazed,
  Who at the beacon's signal flame hath raised
  Within his heart hope's upward-flickering fire,
Anon with change of tale to mourn his foiled desire ?

  Surely it suits a woman's wit
To hopes unproven still to offer greeting.
  Too trustfully her frontier guards admit
The bright invaders at the barrier beating.
  Swiftly they pass ; but swiftly dies
The glad tale, told in woman's joyous cries.

[*As they cease their song, their gaze is caught by a figure running towards them along the dusty high road. As he draws near, the tokens of a herald become visible. Their* LEADER *speaks :*

Soon shall we learn if gleaming lantern-lights,
Beacons and fiery couriers speak us true,
Or whether with a dream-like ecstasy
The fire's glad greeting hath our hearts ensnared.
Lo, from the shore a herald comes, his brows
Shaded with olive sprays ; the thirsty dust,
Fringing its sister mire about his feet,
Bears witness that he brings a tale, no smoke
Of smouldering forest-faggot certifies ;

But either shall he cry aloud, "Rejoice!"
Or else—nay, Heaven forfend the contrary
And grant good sequel to good auguries!
And whoso from this prayer withholds assent,
On his own head fall folly's punishment!

Enter HERALD, *running. As he reaches the space in front of the palace, he kneels down and salutes the earth; he rises and greets, first the Sun, and then in turn the images of the Gods and heroes that adorn the palace front.*

HERALD.

O land, my land of Argos! Home again,
After ten years!
One hope fulfilled, where many a hope was lost!
For never did I think on Argive soil
To die, and find in this loved earth my grave.
Now hail, thou soil of home! Hail beams of the sun,
And Zeus our sovereign, and thou, Pythian King,
So but thine arrows[1] plague us nevermore.
Faith, by Scamander thou wast wroth enow!
But be our Saviour now, and heal our hurts,
Apollo, Lord! And all ye Gods assembled,
Homage to all! And mine own patron, Hermes,
Good Herald unto whom the heralds pray;
And heroes, ye that sent us: O receive
With favour home again the host ye sped,
All that the spear hath spared!

[1] Alluding to the pestilence, of which Apollo was lord.

Hail, royal home,
Loved palace roof, and thrones of majesty!
Hail, all ye holy sunward-facing forms!
With kindly favour now, if ere of old,
Receive your sovereign after many a year.
For lo, day's harbinger from darkest night,
To you and all, King Agamemnon comes.
Then give him goodly welcome, as is meet,
Who with the mattock of Heaven's righteousness
Hath all the land of Troy ravaged and torn
Till not one seed of life therein was left.
So hath he harnessed Troy unto his will,
Our blessed sovereign, Atreus' elder son,
Of all men living worthiest reverence!
For neither Paris nor his confederate town
Can boast their deed outweighed the recompense
Since he, convicted thief and ravisher,
Hath forfeited the prize; and home and land
Are desolate as a gleaned harvest-field.
Yea, Priam's house pays quittance, o'er and o'er!

CHORUS.

Welcome, thou herald of the hosts of Greece!

HERALD.

'Tis well; and I'll not ask the gods to give
Another day of life!

CHORUS.

Has love for this dear land
So reft thee of all else?

HERALD.

I weep for joy of it!

CHORUS.

Ah, 'tis a blessed weakness!

HERALD.

Nay, what mean you?
Teach me, that I may know!

CHORUS.

As ye for us,
Even so we longed for you.

HERALD.

The army and the land
Each aching for the other?

CHORUS.

Many a time
My heart in secret groaned.

HERALD.

Whence came this grief?
Ye loved not—once—our host!

CHORUS.

Long since I found
In silence, suffering's balm.

HERALD.

What might this mean?
Did any cause you dread, your lords away?

CHORUS.

Like thee, I would not live another day.

HERALD.

Yea, we have thriven! Howbeit, all in all,
Though we might count us fortunate in much,
Yet was there much amiss. Who but the Gods
Lives scatheless ever through eternity?
For if I were to tell our life at sea,
The labours and the ill lodgment that we bore,
The few, brief landings on the barren coast—
What miseries did we not daily bear,
Cursing our daily lot? But, once ashore,
There in our plight we found e'en more to loathe.
For there our sleep was 'neath a foeman's walls,
And rains from heaven, and the dank mists exhaled
From the pasture-land still soaked us, in our raiment
A clinging horror, breeding vermin there.
Then, but to tell of the cold, when birds dropped dead
And snow from Ida swept, intolerable,
Or the summer heat, when the sea sank to sleep
In glassy calm upon its noontide bed—
What boots it to complain? The toil is past;
And some are dead, and past and o'er for them
All care for evermore to rise again.
Why tell the roll of those whose days are done,
And vex the living with the cruel tale?
'Tis time for sorrow now to bid farewell;
And we, survivors of the host of Greece,
We count the good victorious o'er the grief!
Wherefore we wanderers over land and sea
May lift our joyful boast on this bright day,
"The Argive host, triumphant over Troy,
To Grecian Gods these spoils doth dedicate
To gleam in splendour on their ancient walls."

And all that hearken, how can they but laud
The city and its leaders ? Thus shall praise
Ascend to Zeus, who to such issue wrought.
So ends my tale.

CHORUS.

Thy speech, I own, hath shown me in the wrong,
For glad correction even age endures.
But in thy tale the Queen, the palace, claim
Chief part ; 'tis mine to share their happiness.

Enter CLYTAEMNESTRA.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Long since I raised my triumph song for joy,
When the first fiery courier came by night
To tell of Troy taken and overthrown.
And one rebuked me : " How ? For beacon's sake
Believest thou that Troy is sacked indeed?
Truly a woman's heart is soon uplifted !"
So did they mock me, call me mad woman.
Yet still I sacrificed ; and, at my woman's hest,
Voice unto voice cried triumph through the city
With joyful proclamation ; and in holy shrines
The fragrant incense drenched the full-fed flames.
And now, what more remains for me to tell ?
Soon by my lord's own lips shall all be told.
But, that with meetest welcome and best speed
I may receive my own liege lord returning—
(What day more gladsome can a true wife see
Than that wherein, by grace of Heaven preserved,
Her warrior-spouse comes to her arms again ?)—
Go, tell him this : bid him come quickly home[1]

[1] The irony in the words that follow should not be missed : the herald's simple acceptance of their face-value adds to its effectiveness.

To taste his city's love ; and find at home
His wife—as loyal as the wife he left !
His house-dog true—that hates the house's foes
Constant in all things ! who in all the years
Hath broken never a pledge !
I know no other rapture, nay, no speech,
Such as breeds censure, from another man.
Ask, rather, if I know how swords are dipped! [*Exit.*

HERALD.

A noble boast, and warranted, I dare swear !
No shame for honest wife to cry it out.

CHORUS.

Thus hath she spoken for thine understanding
A specious word for them that read aright.
But speak thou, herald, and of Menelaus ;
Is he returned with you, to bring again
Unto our land the comfort of our strength ?

HERALD.

I cannot frame a lie and feign it fair,
That friends may draw from it long hours of ease

CHORUS.

Can you not tell us fair at once and true ?
'Tis ill dissembling, when these twain are parted.

HERALD.

The man is vanished from the Achaean host,
He and his vessel with him, sooth to say !

CHORUS.

How ? Put he forth from Ilion openly,
Or did a storm—no miracle—snatch him from you

HERALD.

You have hit it like a marksman! Your few words
Have briefly chronicled a long-lived woe.

CHORUS.

How spake the other mariners of him?
As living or as dead?

HERALD.

That none could say,
Save Helios, who gives life to all the earth.

CHORUS.

Tell us how fell the storm upon the fleet,
By spite of Heaven, and how it made an end.

HERALD.

Nay, 'twere a sin to stain with news of ill
A day of blessing; keep Heaven's honours pure!
When one with woeful mien bears to the city
Tidings that mock its prayers, of hosts destroyed,
A common blow for all the folk to share,
And many several men from several homes
Sent out like scapegoats to their doom—the blow
Of the double thong that Ares loves to wield,
The curse two-edged, death's coursers driven abreast—
For such an one 'tis meet, with sorrows fraught,
To raise the Furies' hideous triumph-song.
But one that bears glad tidings of success
Unto a smiling state and prosperous—
How can I blend my evil with the good,
Or tell the storm that the Achaeans suffered,
Heaven's instrument of wrath?

For there was league
'Twixt two old enemies, water and fire,
And these conspired together to bring to naught
The unhappy Argive host.
So in the night
Dark heaving waves arose to trouble us;
For winds of Thrace were dashing ship on ship,
Till, violently riven and buffeted
With gusts of whirling storm and lashing surge,
The evil shepherd seized them, and our eyes
Saw them no more.
But when the sun's bright lantern beamed again,
We viewed the Aegean sea as 'twere a field
Blossoming with all Achaea's manhood slain
Amid the wrack of shipping. As for us,
Our hull was staunch: for someone—God, not man—
Laid hand upon the helm and snatched from doom,
Or begged her rescue; and upon the prow
Sat smiling Fortune, guarding us from harm.
Wherefore at anchor we were safe from swamping,
And, sailing, ran not on those iron coasts.
So, when we had escaped a watery death,
Scarce crediting our luck, through the bright hours
On strange events our thoughts were feeding still,
Our host so ill-bestead, so sorely smitten.
And now, if any one of them yet lives,
Marry, we are dead to them as they to us!
May the best prove true, say I! For Menelaus—
Be sure that he will come, if any man!
Know this at least, if the sun's eye looks on him
Alive and sound, and not this while doth Zeus
Mean to destroy the whole house, root and branch,

Then we may hope for him a safe return.
Such is the truth, and more I cannot say. [*Exit.*

CHORUS.

Who named her, in wisdom unerring ?
What mighty one, hid from our eyes,
His heart unto prophecy stirring
His tongue to the issue made wise ?
Helen, with spears for her wooing,
Helen, the spoil of the strife,
Ships', warriors', and cities' undoing,
With Hell she was rife !

The delicate curtains were parted,
Giant Zephyr blew soft on the sail,
Till the bloodhounds were slipped, and they started
On the oar-blades' invisible trail :
On the track of the vessel that stranded
By the fringes of Simois' flood,
Shields flashing, a multitude banded
For battle and blood.

Troy's town by the bond of her plighting
Was bound in a bondage of pain.
Wrath sped her, the guilty requiting
For Zeus and the guest-table's stain,
On those who in wantonness vaunted
The praise of that bridal of sin,
When hymns hymeneal they chanted,
The ravisher's kin.

But changed is the strain of their singing :
With many a dirge for the dead
The old city of Priam is ringing,
For Paris the dismally wed.

With deep desolation and dirges
The day of her agony runs,
And piteous the sorrow, where surges
The blood of her sons.

So in his house a man may raise
Some lion's whelp, that craves in vain
Its native milk, its mother slain:
A gentle thing in early days,
To children's eyes a dear delight,
E'en to the old a gladsome sight.
For often in his arms it lies
As gentle as a weaned child,
And oft, by hunger pangs beguiled,
It fawns and woos him with its eyes.

But passing time reveals the beast,
The birthright of the lion brood.
In recompense for home and food,
Unbidden it prepares a feast;
Swift doom upon the flocks doth leap,
And the house reeks with blood of sheep.
In helpless woe the household eyes
The mischief wrought, the heaps of dead,
The priest of Fate their hands have fed
To work this bitter sacrifice.

Straightway to Ilion came
The breath of summer seas,
The glances light of eyes that smite
And only wound to please;
Lure of sweet varieties;
The very bloom of Love that robs men's hearts of ease.

Anon to bitter end
That happy bridal sped.
In evil hour, with evil dower,
To Priam's house a fatal spouse
By Zeus the bride was led.
With weeping fraught, the bridegroom brought
A Fury to his bed.

Old is the tale, and dim,
That mortal happiness,
Grown great, hath still an issue ill,
Nor wanes in childlessness :
That still from good success
Springeth the evil seed of mortal bitterness.

Ah, such the tale they tell,
But ne'er will I agree !
The impious deed hath impious seed,
Like sire, like son, the race doth run
Through all eternity.
But Fate doth shine on the righteous line
With blessèd progeny.

The unrighteous deed of old doth bear
The unrighteous deed of later year,
Issuing in sorrows on the earth
When dawns the fated day of birth;
And that resistless, tameless spirit
Of godless pride : lo, these inherit
The likeness of their parents fell,
Blackening the house with gloom of Hell.

But Justice lights with radiance pure
The murky hovels of the poor,

And honours him that walks aright,
Shunning with averted sight
Homes whose walls, with gold besprent,
Shelter not the innocent.
Wealth's power she honours not, nor heeds
Flattery's forged title deeds,
But with the righteous she abides,
And each man's work to the issue guides.

[*At this point the car that bears* AGAMEMNON *drives on to the stage, followed by another in which Cassandra sits, and no doubt attended by a throng of soldiers and courtiers. The* CHORUS *turn towards him in greeting.*

Come, thou spoiler of Troy, my King,
Child of Atreus' seed,
How shall I greet thee? How shall I bring
Homage meet from a tongue unfeigning,
Nought refraining, and nought constraining
More than the heart's due meed?
Many a man is the fool of show,
Little of truth they heed!
For each will haste in the hour of woe
To blend his cry with the cry of the smitten,
Or ever the tooth of pain hath bitten,
Or ever the snug heart bleed.
So, when the heavens have sent success,
Lips will writhe in obsequiousness,
Forcing a feignèd smile—
Yet never a lure of the fawning eye,
Streaming with love and loyalty,
Can the flock's wise lord beguile.
Lo, even to me, in the days that were,
(Freely I speak it) thou didst wear

No gracious guise, as for Helen's sake
That great armament thou didst make.
Wisdom was not thy pilot then,
To ransom home with the blood of men
A sinner that loved her shame!
But now, from the true heart's core we cry,
"Blessed be the task that blessedly
To such fulfilment came!"
And time shall prove to thine eyes, ywis,
Who in the city hath wrought amiss
And him that hath holp the same.

AGAMEMNON (*seated in his car*).

First unto Argos and the country's gods
'Tis meet I pay devoirs, that wrought with me
This day's home-coming, and the righteous dole
I have done the town of Priam. Yea, for the right
They judged, nor bent to supplications,
But even to Ilion's blasting, carnage-fraught,
They cast their votes into the urn of blood
Decisive; while to that on the other side
Their hand brought hopes anigh, but filled it not.
Even yet in smoke is writ the city's doom:
The Furies' storm-wrack liveth; and the ashes,
The dying witnesses of Ilion's death,
Breathe to the sky rich gusts and savoury.
Wherefore, not unremembered be the debt
We owe to Heaven! Vengeance have we taken
Of the haughty ravisher; and for his lady
The city is ground to dust, unto small dust,
By the monstrous armèd brood of the Argive horse
That crouched and leaped what time the Pleiads set.
Yea, o'er their guard our ravening lion sprang,

And lapped till jaws with royal blood were red.
So, with full speech from a full heart, I pay
First duty to the Gods. But for thy counsels—
I marked thy speech, and I forget it not,
And I am with thee, of the selfsame mind.
For rare are they so free from envy's touch
Whose loves are not distempered by success;
And thus the jealous poison at the heart
Doth make calamity of double weight,
For each is galled by his particular load,
And chafes at sight of others' happiness.
Lo, that I know I speak; well have I proved
Such echoes of goodwill, a shadow's shade,
Of those who feigned them still my friends most staunch.
One only—he that most was loth to sail—
Harnessed beside me, pulled with steadfast will—
Odysseus, be he living now or dead.
Next, what concerns the city or the Gods
We will debate, in concourse duly set
Of full assembly; and therein devise
How wholesome growths, well-seasoned, may endure,
And, where is need of healing surgery,
The knife or cautery, with service kind,
May strive to avert fell issues of disease.
So to the halls and chambers of my home
I go, to give first greeting to the Gods,
Who sent me forth and bring me back again.
So may attendant victory fold her wings!

[*As he is about to leave the car*, CLYTAEMNESTRA *enters. She stops him with her speech, which displays all the signs of the false, flattering friend to which the* CHORUS *and* AGAMEMNON *have been referring.*

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Men of the city, counsellors of Argos,
I feel no shame to speak my wifely love
Before you ; shyness melts away with time ;
Therefore I'll tell, what all too well I know,
The story of mine own unhappy years
Spent while my Lord was camped 'neath Ilion.
First, for a wife to sit forlorn at home
Is of itself a thing most dolorous ;
Next, many a tale she hears in malice told,
For gossip follows close on gossip's heels,
Braying, each news more fearful than the last.
And if my lord be pierced with all the wounds
Whereof they brought the tidings to his home,
Was never net so full of holes as he !
And, were he dead, as many a rumour ran,
Then, like a second Geryon, triple-bodied,
He might have boasted of a threefold shroud
Of sheltering earth, for every form its grave !
Yea, for malignant rumours such as these
Full oft the noose about my neck has lain,
Till other hands released me from its gripe.
Therefore our son, the lord and arbiter
Of that love, plighted once 'twixt thee and me,
Orestes stands not at my side this hour,
As were his due : nor marvel thou thereat.
Strophius, Lord of Phocis, our true friend
And comrade proved in arms, keeps him in care,
Still of the double peril warning me :
Thy hazards under Ilion ; and the fear
Lest lawless tongues, astir among the folk,
Confabricate some treason; so to spurn

The mighty fallen is the common way!
Reason so clear, suspicion cannot soil.
But as for me, the rivers of my eyes
Are staunched and dry. I have no tears to weep.
In sooth, those eyes have suffered many a smart,
Late-weeping for the lanterns idly lit
For thee that saw them never! Did I sleep?
Even at the tiny whirring of a gnat
I'd start to waking visions out of dreams,
And think more woes of thee than time could match.
But now, these troubles ended, and my heart
Eased of its load of sorrow, I would cry,
"Thou art the very watch-dog of the flock,
The ship's sure stay, the roof's sustaining prop,
Dear as his only child to father's heart,
Dear as the land they never hoped to see
To mariners; bright sunshine after storm,
A springing well to the thirsty wayfarer!"
Yea, with such cry 'tis meet I welcome him!
Hence, jealous fears! We have borne enough of woe!
Now, dear one, from thy chariot get thee down,
Yet set not on the ground, my prince, that foot
That strode on Ilion's dust! Ho, slaves, despatch!
Lay tapestries before the hero's steps!
Straight be the path of blood-red raiment strewn,
And justice lead him to a home unhoped!
All else my vigilant heart, by sleep untamed,
Justly shall compass, as the Gods ordain.

AGAMEMNON.

Daughter of Leda, guardian of my home,
Thy speech mates well mine absence. 'Faith, 'twas long!

But other lips than thine should mete me out
Whate'er of praise be due. And for the rest,
Cosset me not with womanish device,
Nor like a savage thrall, with mouth agape,
Bawl out thy grovelling salutations,
Nor with the strewing of raiment make my path
Invidious. Keep thy bounty for the Gods!
For me to walk upon thy gleaming gauds,
Seeing I am human, were a fearful thing.
Respect me as a man, not as a God.
Fame speaks without the aid of gaudy mats,
And Heaven's best guerdon is—a loyal heart!
Call that man truly blest who ends his life
In unabated wealth. Such is my word,
Be such my deed, and confidence were mine.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Nay, tell me this, and as thy heart dictates.

AGAMEMNON.

My heart is fixed. I shall not swerve therein.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Wouldst thou—in fear—have vowed such sacrifice ?[1]

AGAMEMNON.

Yes, had authority prescribed it so.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

And how if this thy triumph had been Priam's ?

[1] Clytaemnestra implies that the act she is performing—the word used might also mean the *sacrifice* she is preparing—is the fulfilment of a vow: either a vow made to buy Agamemnon's safe return, or—as she means it—a vow of vengeance for *his* sacrifice of Iphigeneia.

AGAMEMNON.

He would have walked on gauds, I make no doubt!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Then heed thou not reproach of mortal men.

AGAMEMNON.

Yet is there puissance in a people's voice.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

No friend doth bless him whom no foe doth curse

AGAMEMNON.

Battle to court is all unwomanly.

CLYTAEMNESTRA (*playing on the Greek dread of unmixed prosperity*).

'Tis prudence in the prosperous to yield.

AGAMEMNON.

Count you success in this for victory?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Thine is the power: then yield, and grant it me!

AGAMEMNON.

Well, have thy will! Ho, slaves, from off my feet
Unbind the shoe that ministers my tread!
And, as I walk the purple, may no shaft
From jealous eyes of Heaven strike me down!
For much it moves me thus with wanton foot
To waste the woven purchase of our wealth.

[*Pointing to the chariot in which* CASSANDRA *still sits motionless.*

So be it!—But with gracious heart, I pray,
Give welcome to this damsel. Victory used

With kindliness wins Heaven's approving eye.
For none abides with joy the slavish yoke,
And she, the choicest flower of all the spoil,
Hath fallen to me, my guerdon from the host.
Now, since in this thing I have yielded me,
Homeward upon the crimson path I go!

[*During the next speech, slaves unloose* AGAMEMNON'S *shoes; he rises from his chariot and enters the palace, followed by* CLYTAEMNESTRA; *her last two lines are spoken after he has gone.*

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Oh, who shall staunch the illimitable sea,
Or drain the precious harvest that it breeds,
Fresh crimson dyes to stain our robes withal?
Within the palace, by God's grace, my prince,
Is store thereof to spare: and poverty
Is stranger to our doors. 'Faith, I had vowed
Trampling of manifold such draperies,
Had the oracular temples so prescribed,
To buy thy life's safe passage,[1] dear my lord!
For so the tree, sure-planted, sends a shoot
To shade the home from the dog-star's scorching beam.
And now, behold thee at thy native hearth,
A breath from summer days, in winter's cold,
And, when Zeus turns the bitter juice of the grape
To wine, a grateful coolness in the house,
Where walks the world's fulfilment of a man.
O Zeus, fulfilment's lord, my prayer fulfil,
And work fulfilment of Thine own high will!

[1] The words may equally well mean either Agamemnon's safe return, or his soul's passage to another world.

CHORUS.

Why, why, ceaselessly
Before me floats the boding fear,
Haunting my heart with augury
While still the burden of the seer
Unbidden, unrequited, dwells upon mine ear,
Nor in my soul doth faith enthronèd dwell,
Like some dim dream the horror to dispel?

The sand is old upon the shore
That round the anchoring cables tossed,
When beneath Ilion's walls of yore
Arose in might the sea-borne host.

Mine eyes have seen them come again,
Yet still within my heart doth ring,
Perversely taught, the dirge's strain,
Matched with no jocund lute-playing;
Nor yet can hope avail, bright confidence to bring,
Nor vain the eddying surges of unrest
That vex with prescience sure my boding breast.

Ah, yet I pray the visions drear
That to my anxious heart are sent
May cheat the prudence of the seer,
Nor find their full accomplishment.

Small ease it bringeth man to gain
The bourne of health; for close beside
Fell neighbour sickness doth abide,
With scarce a fence to part the twain.

Full oft on life's uncharted sea,
Holding her course 'neath skies serene,
The ship of mortal destiny
Hath foundered on some reef unseen.
And though fear, casting forth a timely measure
Of gathered wealth, can from its ruin save
The house, o'erladen with the weight of treasure,
The vessel, from the engulfing wave,
Though Zeus in bounty may assuage
With harvest of the fruitful year the deadly famine's rage,

Yet, when upon the earth the stain
Of man's blood murderously spilt
Cries out upon the murderer's guilt,
What spell can charm it forth again ?
Nay, did not Zeus in husbandry
Make brief his days, whose curious lore
Prevailed to bid the grave restore
Its dead, and mocked mortality ?—
Yet ordinance by ordinance of Heaven
From ripe accomplishment is still refrained.
Else had my tongue, by the sick heart o'erdriven,
Poured forth its burden unrestrained ;
Now it but moans in dark despair,
Nor can my burning brain wind clear the tangled threads of care.

CLYTAEMNESTRA *re-enters, and addresses* CASSANDRA, *who sits motionless in the car.*

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Thou too, Cassandra ! Come within !
For Zeus hath shown thee mercy, and decreed

That in this house thou share the lustral rites,
Standing amid the slaves about his hearth.
Then get thee from the car! Be not disdainful!
Do they not tell how even Alcmena's son
Brooked once to eat the bread of slavery,
Sold in the mart? Then, if necessity
Lay on thee too this fate, count it for gain
To serve a house grown ancient in its wealth.
They that have reaped the harvest of good fortune
Are still unkind and tyrannous to the slave.
Here thou shalt find—what custom bids expect!

[*Pause.* CASSANDRA *shows no sign of having heard.*

CHORUS.

To thee she speaks, and plainly. Yea, fast bound
Thou art in destiny's toils;
Obey an if thou wilt—or disobey.

[*Throughout the scene, till* CLYTAEMNESTRA *departs,* CASSANDRA *sits motionless in the chariot.*

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Nay, if she be not, like a swallow, skilled
Only in chirruping for speech, my words,
Reaching her mind, shall breed obedience there!

CHORUS.

Come! For thy case she points the easiest road.
Obey, and leave thy station in the car!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

I have no time to waste before the doors
In idle words: even now about the fire
Of the central hearth the victims wait the knife.

If thou wilt do my bidding, linger not!
But if my words reach not thine understanding,
Sign with barbarian hand in lieu of speech!

CHORUS.

Plain must the prompting be to move her wits;
Behold her, like a wild thing newly taken!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Nay, she is mad, the thrall of forward thoughts!
She cometh from a city newly taken,
And cannot wear the bit, e'er she hath champed
In foam and blood her wilfulness away.
I'll lavish no more words upon her pride! [*Exit.*

CHORUS.

Yet I will not be wroth! I pity her.
Come, thou forlorn one: leave thy chariot seat!
This yoke thou needst must bear; consent thee to begin.

CASSANDRA (*stepping from the chariot, and making towards the Statue of Phoebus with arms raised in supplication.*)

Ah, woe, woe, woe! Alas, O earth!
Apollo! Apollo!

CHORUS.

Why dost thou cry thy woes to Loxias?
He is not one whom men with wailings greet!

CASSANDRA.

Ah, woe, woe, woe! Alas, O Earth!
Apollo! Apollo!

CHORUS.

Again with words ill-omened she doth cry
To him that standeth not where mourners wail.

CASSANDRA.

Apollo! Apollo!
Wayfarer, my destroyer!
This twice hast thou destroyed me, nor stayed thine hand!

CHORUS.

Hush! She would prophesy of her own sorrows!
In the slave's heart still glows the spark divine

CASSANDRA.

Apollo! Apollo!
Wayfarer, my destroyer!
Whither hast thou brought me faring? To what home?

CHORUS.

To the home of Atreus' children. Learn of me,
If this thou knowest not. Thou shalt find it true.

CASSANDRA (*with sudden passion*).

A home Heaven hates! One that hath known
Murders many of kin, with men for kine,
In butchery's shambles, with blood a-stream!

CHORUS.

This foreign damsel is a hound keen-scented;
And, on this trail, she shall not hunt in vain!

CASSANDRA.

Nay, there are witnesses, whose truth I trust!
These babes I see, their butchery bewailing:
The flesh roasted, for their father's feasting!

CHORUS.

Fame of thy skill in augury hath reached us.
Yet here we know no need of prophesying !

CASSANDRA.

Oh, horror, horror ! look, look what is toward !
What new stroke and terrible—
What terrible deed in this house is toward !
Love cannot bear it, nor healing cure it, and helpers stand afar !

CHORUS.

Of this last prophesying nought I know.
The rest I knew : the city rings with them !

CASSANDRA (*recoiling as from a vision of horror*).

Ah, fell woman ! Is this thy deed ?
Thy husband, thy consort—in the shining water !
How shall I tell thy deed ?
Swiftly it speedeth ; hand after hand reacheth !

CHORUS.

I am still at fault : for now, in place of riddles,
Peers through a mist the oracle and mocks me.

CASSANDRA.

Ah, ah ! avaunt, avaunt !
What is it I behold ?
Death goes a-fowling !
Nay, she is the net, the snare
Who shared his bed—who now doth share
The deed of blood ! O ravening pack
That haunt the house, on murder's track,
Wake vengeance with your howling !

CHORUS.

What Fury-voices wilt thou rouse, to sing
Doom o'er the house? Small cheer thy bodings bring!
Back to my heart the life-drops rush—
Yea, even the last pale drops, that gush
Forth with the spear, when life's last ray
Sinks, and the mists of death blot out the warrior's day!

CASSANDRA.

Ah, ah! Beware, beware!
Keep from the cow her mate!
See, he is taken!
She has him; in the deadly pall!
The dark horn smites! I see him fall
In vessel of water! Death and Hell
Are in that urn, whose fortune fell
With my wild song I waken!

CHORUS.

Not mine the lore of prophecy with skill
To unravel; yet thy words betoken ill.
Ah, when did prophecy reveal
For mortals, aught of mortal weal?
In maze of words with terror fraught
Knowledge of boding fear its craft hath ever brought.

CASSANDRA.

Yea, there is anguish for me.
And bitter the portion the harsh Fates send!
Blending my lot with thine, I sing
The mingled cup of our suffering:
Where hast thou brought me? To what end?
Surely to die with thee!

CHORUS.

O spirit troubled of God, O brain
Wild with madness, whose unschooled strain
Doth thine own fate bewail,
Like that sad spirit, the voice undying,
Through years of sorrow for Itys, Itys sighing,
The russet nightingale!

CASSANDRA.

Ah me for the nightingale's years!
Sweet singer, to thee the Gods have given
A feathered body for covering,
A tearless struggle, a sweet passing:
But ah! my flesh they give to be riven
With the sharp two-edged spears!

CHORUS.

Troubled of God, ah! whence the vain
Surge of sorrow, the pulse of pain
That shrills through thy sad tale?
With sweet song mingled and grievous crying,
From what dim bourne of thy prophesying
Cometh the voice of bale?

CASSANDRA.

Ah! woe for the spousals of Paris, the storm where my dearest have sunk!
And woe for the streams of Scamander, the streams that my fathers have drunk!
How sweet were my days, as to girlhood I grew by those waters of yore!
But now with my bodings shall echo Cocytus and Acheron's shore.

CHORUS.

Ah! all too plain a tale thy lips have spoken;
A babe might read it clear!
Lo, like a stab my very life-blood draining,
The sad soft notes of thy complaining
Smite, that my very heart is broken
As thy harsh doom I hear!

CASSANDRA.

Ah me for the woes of my city! She is fallen to rise not again!
Ah me for the sheep of the flock by my sire on the battlements slain!
Vain—vain! For this cup which she drinketh, from her lips no deliverer could thrust:
And I, shall I shrink from my portion, or grudge my heart's drops to the dust?

CHORUS.

Lo, on thy lips the burden still the same!
Oh, surely not unbidden
Of some grim friend that tortureth
Thy laden soul, of pain and death
Thy song thou still dost frame,
Whereof the end is hidden.

CASSANDRA (*more calmly*).

Nay! For no longer like a new-wed bride
Dim through the veils my oracle shall peer!
But, like the winds that beat at morning's gate,
Clear shall it stream, and dash against the dawn,
Wave upon wave of woe o'ertopping woe.
No longer in a riddle will I teach,

But while I, hound-like, snuff upon the trail
Of evil wrought of old, follow me close
And witness what I find.
This sheltering roof—
A choir ne'er leaves it, that with single voice
Unsweetly singeth, singing still of woe!
Yea, and within, by drunkenness made bold,
Dwelleth a revel-rout, whose drink is blood,
Of fiends familiar, none can exorcise;
But still they sit, chanting their boding chant
Of guilt original: anon their hate
Cries out upon a brother's ravished bed,
That brought small kindness to the ravisher—
Say, has that shaft gone wide, or hit the mark?
Am I the lying seer, the charlatan
Crying my worthless wares from door to door?
Come, seal it with an oath! Be sworn that I
Read clear these sorry tales of long ago!

CHORUS.

How could an oath, a pledge in honour plighted,
Give healing here? In sooth, I muse that thou,
Bred far beyond the sea, canst ravel out
A strange town's story, as it were thine own!

CASSANDRA.

The seer Apollo made me of this craft.

CHORUS.

Te'l me—but he's a God!—was it for love?

CASSANDRA.

Once, modesty forbade me speak of this.

CHORUS.

Yea, Fortune's minions still are delicate.

CASSANDRA.

Yet—'twas a lusty wooing and a sweet!

CHORUS.

Even to the getting of babes, as lovers use?

CASSANDRA.

Nay, for I broke the tryst with Loxias made.

CHORUS.

E'en then wast thou in fealty to this craft?

CASSANDRA.

Already to my folk all fate I showed.

CHORUS.

How then? Did Loxias' anger wound thee not?

CASSANDRA.

Faithless to him, no faith thenceforth I found.

CHORUS.

Yet to our ears thy prophecies ring true.

CASSANDRA.

Ah, ah! The pain, the pain!
Again the dreadful travail-throe, the whirl,
The dizzying spasm that brings the prophecy!
Look, where they hover o'er the house, those babes,
Dream-phantom forms of children foully slain
By kinsman's hands! Oh, see, their hands are laden
With meat, their very flesh! Behold they bear

Entrails and inward parts, a piteous freight
Whereof their father tasted. Ah! for this
Be sure one plotteth recompense: a lion,
But craven, prowling in another's lair—
To guard it safe, until the master come!—
My master—for my neck must bear the yoke!
And he, the fleet's great Admiral, the lord
Of shattered Ilion; little he knows
What all those words profuse of the hating tongue,
Those fawning glances of the murderous eye,
Like fiends of stealth, shall wreak in the evil hour!
So bold the woman grows to smite the man!
How name a thing so hideous as she?
Nor Amphisbaena, nor the sailors' pest,
Rock-haunting Scylla, hath a shape so foul;
Hell's fiends a-riot in a mother's heart,
And, for love's dues, the ruthless lusts of war!
Lo, how she raised her loud exultant cry,
The brazen, as o'er foemen turned to rout,
And feigned it all for joy of his return!
Believe not, if you will not! What of that?
It cometh: soon shall you behold it: then
Own me a seer too true, and pity me!

CHORUS.

Thyestes' feast, wrought of his children's flesh,
That know I, and I shudder: and a dread
Is on me when I hear thee tell the tale
Unerringly: no art of guess-work thine!
But from thy further trail I am at fault.

CASSANDRA.

'Tis Agamemnon's death that you shall see.

CHORUS.

Unhappy woman, hush thy boding tongue!

CASSANDRA.

For that I speak, no healer is ordained.

CHORUS.

Nay, if it come to pass, which Heaven forfend!

CASSANDRA (*with quiet irony*).

Thou to thy prayers—and they to bloody deeds!

CHORUS.

Who is the man would wreak so foul a crime?

CASSANDRA.

What! From the trail so utterly at fault?

CHORUS.

Who should perform the deed I could not learn.

CASSANDRA.

Yet—all too well—I know the speech of Greece!

CHORUS.

E'en so the Pythian; yet his words are dim.

CASSANDRA.

Ah me, the fire, the fire! It whelms me o'er!
Wolf-lord Apollo, woe, ah, woe is me!
She, the two-footed lioness; she that mates
With the base wolf, her lion lord away,
She shall kill me—me the unhappy! yea, she boasts
That in her cup of wrath—e'en while she whets
The knife to slay her husband—she shall mingle

Venom she bears for me : yea, and in blood
Shall quit the score on him that brought me home.
Why bear it, why—this mockery of myself,
This prophet's staff, and garlands on my neck ?
Go to perdition—e'er I go to death !
(Flinging them on the ground.)
Out, out upon you ! Thus I pay your hire !
Doom with your curse some other in my stead !
See, 'tis Apollo that doth strip from me
The selfsame prophet's livery that he gave !
How now ? Hath he not seen me, while I wore
His bravery, mocked to scorn by one and all—
All friends turned foes—and did he aid me then ?
Nay, like some wandering mountebank, I heard
Men taunt me " Beggar ! Starveling ! Piteous wight !"
But lo, the Seer would have me seer no more,
Since he hath brought me to this mortal pass—
Where, for a father's altar, stands a block
Hot with the life-blood 'neath the stroke outpoured.
Yet not forlorn of Heaven shall be our doom :
There cometh yet another, to do us right,
Drowning his father's wrongs in mother's blood !
Yea, he shall come, the wanderer, the disowned,
The fugitive, to crown the cup of death
With vengeance on his nearest. For the Gods
Have sworn a mighty oath that he shall make
Requital for his father's prostrate corse.
Ah, why, for pity, this long time do I
Make moan ? Have I not seen the town of Troy
Fare even as she fares ? And they that took the town—
Have I not seen God's sentence upon them ?

I will go hence, and faring as I may,
I will not shrink from dying.
(*Stepping towards the palace-door.*)
Portals of Death, I greet you as I go!
Grant me, I beg, the boon of one swift blow,
That with all peace, while forth the life-stream flows,
In death without a pang these eyes may close!

CHORUS.

O woman rich in suffering, yea, and rich
In wisdom, we have listened to thee long.
But if indeed of thine own doom thou knowest,
Why, like some ox by heavenly promptings driven,
Goest thou thus boldly to the sacrifice?

CASSANDRA.

Friends, there is no escape, no lingering more!

CHORUS.

Yet is the later still the better hour.

CASSANDRA.

The day is come: to flee were small avail.

CHORUS.

Ah, with a noble heart thou bearest thy lot!

CASSANDRA.

None that was happy heard such words as these.

CHORUS.

Yet to win praise is comely, e'en in death!

CASSANDRA.

O father, father, and thy glorious brood!
[*She goes to the doorway and recoils with horror.*

CHORUS.

Nay, what is this ? What terror stays thy feet?

CASSANDRA.

Pah ! (*gasping*).

CHORUS.

Wherefore dost gasp ? For horror at thy heart ?

CASSANDRA.

Murder! The very air with blood is laden!

CHORUS.

What ails thee ? 'Tis the victims at the hearth!

CASSANDRA.

No ; but such breath as from the tomb exhales!

CHORUS.

No perfumed Syrian palace thou dost tell!

CASSANDRA.

Yet will I go, e'en there, within, bewailing
My fate and Agamemnon's. Life, good-bye !
O friends,
Not with an idle dread, like bird at bush,
I flutter; witness this when I am dead;
When for my woman's death a woman dies,
And for a man ill-mated falls a man:
I crave this of your courtesy, ere I die!

CHORUS.

Sad soul, my tears fall for thy fate foreshown!

CASSANDRA (*turning back once more, on the threshold*).

Yet once, ere silence hold me, I would speak
To publish mine own elegy. Yea, I cry
To this last sunlight that mine eyes shall see!
When on the abhorrèd murderers vengeance falls
Be this withal remembered—that they slew
A woman and a slave; no valiant deed!
Ah me, for mortal life! Its happiness?
A painted vanity; and when sorrow falls,
One stroke of the sponge blots out the gracious scene!
Herein is cause for tears more deep than thine.
[*She goes into the Palace.*

CHORUS (*softly, as awestruck*).

Yea, none of mortals hath his fill
Of fortune; though a thousand fingers
Point him her favourite, yet still
None bars his portal while she lingers,
Nor cries, "Enough! Return no more!"

Lo, he to whom the all-blest have given
On Priam's town to work his will,
Returneth, sealed with grace of Heaven—

But now, if he must quit the score
With blood, for blood was spilt of yore,
And death by death requiting, bring
Another's death for his purging,
Who then of mortals can avow
His own life scatheless—as he hears what we hear now?

AGAMEMNON (*within*).

Help ho! Within! Murder! I am slain!

CHORUS.

Hush! Who cries "Murder!" stricken mortally?

AGAMEMNON.

Help ho! Again! Another deadly stroke!

CHORUS (*moving hither and thither in helpless agitation*).

Hark! the King's voice crying! I misdoubt the deed is done!
Come, let us confer, if safety may from counsel spring.

FIRST ELDER.

Hearken then to my proposal: cry about the town
Bidding all the folk to gather round the palace-doors!

SECOND ELDER.

I advise we rush upon them, presently confound
Treason, while the sword is smoking!

THIRD ELDER.

I am of accord.
Action has my vote: the season brooks not of delay!

FOURTH ELDER.

Clearly may we see the issue: such a deed foreshows
Tyranny within the city raising standards high!

FIFTH ELDER.

Yea, and we let slip the moments! theirs are feet that spurn
Tardiness belauded! theirs are hands that slumber not!

SIXTH ELDER.

Counsel to achieve I know not: this alone I see.
Action must be based on counsel!

SEVENTH ELDER.

There am I with thee.
How can words restore the dead one back to life again ?

EIGHTH ELDER.

Shall we, for our life's prolonging, basely yield us thralls ?
These defilers of the palace—choose we such to rule ?

NINTH ELDER.

Nay, it were beyond endurance ! Rather let us die ;
Death will be a richer portion, sure, than slavery !

TENTH ELDER.

Must we take a groan for witness ? May we so be sure
That our King is perished ?

ELEVENTH ELDER.

Let us know before we spend
Wrath upon it, truth or guesswork : wide the gulf between !

TWELFTH ELDER.

So on every side agreement bids my voice prevail,
Surely to discover how he fareth, Atreus' son.

[*The doors of the palace open, revealing* CLYTAEMNESTRA *standing over the bodies of her husband and* CASSANDRA.

CLYTAEMNESTRA (*calmly and coldly*).

Much have I spoke ere this, to suit the hour,
Which now I make no scruple to gainsay !
How else should one devising for a foe
A foeman's fate, while foes still walk as friends,
Set up the snares of doom too high to o'erleap ?

Not unforeseen of old, this quarrel old
Is come to crisis, when the hour was ripe.
Here where I smote, I stand, above my work!
For so I wrought, and so I'll not deny
That neither could he fend nor flee from fate.
For round him, like a fisherman, I cast
A mighty net, a garb of fatal wealth,
And twice I smote him, and with moanings twain
Lo, his limbs drooped : there on him fallen I dealt
A third stroke, for a boon to aid my prayer
To One below, the Guardian of the dead!
So lay he, panting out his very life,
And, spouting forth the bitter stream of blood,
Bespattered me with crimson gory rain,
As welcome as the quickening drops from heaven
That feed the swelling grain within the husk.
So stands it, elder men of Argos town!
Give joy, an if ye will, but I give glory!
For, might we pour upon his corse that cup
Himself hath mixed, 'twere meet and more than meet,
So deep with curses hath he filled the bowl,
Curses and woe, whereof himself doth drink!

CHORUS.

I marvel at the boldness of thy tongue,
O'er thy slain lord to fling so fierce a speech!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Ay! (*scornfully*).
Essay me as a woman and a fool!
Untrembling I proclaim the thing ye know.

Praise me or blame, I reck not of it! Here
Is my lord Agamemnon : he is dead!
This is the hand that slew him! and this deed
Which it hath wrought is righteous. That is all!

CHORUS.

Woman, what herb of the ground, or what draught of
the streams of the sea,
Hath conjured this madness of murder, this curse of
the folk upon thee ?
By the cleft of thy cleaving, the cast of thy casting,
flung forth shalt thou be
'Neath the load of the citizens' hate!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Yea, now thou dost adjudge me banishment,
The city's hate to bear, the people's curse!
But then, no voice was raised against his deed,
When, with no more of pity than some lord
Of fleecy flocks feels for the beast he slays,
He gave his daughter to the knife—that babe
That turned my bitter travail into joy—
To charm the bluster of the winds of Thrace!
Him should ye not be hounding from the land
In purging of defilement ? Yet ye hear
My deed, and straight, no judge so merciless!
Hear then, and when ye threaten, mark it well :
Conquer, and ye shall rule : I am prepared :
But if God guide the issue otherwise,
Yet shall ye learn discretion at the last!

CHORUS.

Yea, mighty thy scheming and lofty thy speech : and by murder, I trow,
Thy heart is uplifted to madness : with the blood-mark thy brows are aglow!
Yet with never a friend to requite thee, to pay with a blow for a blow
Thou art called by the summons of fate.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Now hearken, how that I will frame mine oath!
By this requital I have ta'en in full
For my lost child : by Doom and by the Fiend,
Vengeance, who claimed this victim at my hand,
No shadow of a dread doth haunt my halls,
While on my hearth Aegisthus kindles fire
True as of old, the shield in whom I trust!
He is fallen, that wrought such havoc of my life,
Dallying 'neath Troy with every Chryseid wench!
And she, the captive here, the soothsayer
And concubine in one, his duteous seer
And consort on the ship's rude bench they shared—
They have fared as they have earned! For he lies thus
And she, that swan-like sang before her death
Most piteous—fallen at his side she lies,
His lover! For a woman's triumph-feast
What sweeter morsel than a rival slain?

CHORUS.

Ah, swiftly come, come without pain
Or lingering wastage sore,
Dark visitant, that bearest among men

The boon of sleep unbroken evermore!
Seeing my gracious lord, my guard is slain,
That for a woman many a burden bore,
And by a woman's hand to death is given o'er!

O Helen, Helen, thou mad spirit!
So many, many a warrior life
For thy sole sake beneath Troy's walls lies slain!
Now the rose's bloom is shown,
Even the red bloom of blood, full blown
The fadeless flower of the very tree of strife
Set in man's home, firm-rooted for his bane!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Nay, crave not Death thy pain to assuage,
Nor upon Helen pour thy rage
With "Murderess" on thy tongue,
Not hers alone believe the guilt
Of Danaan lives so many spilt,
Of cureless sorrow sprung!

CHORUS.

Fiend, ravening o'er the homes, the brood
Of Tantalus' double line,
Wielding, in guise of kindred womanhood,
Thy dreadful power, that sears this heart of mine,
Now, like some foul bird o'er its carrion food,
Thou, towering o'er the dead, a form malign,
In foul fit song dost boast the fruits of thy design!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Now thou dost mend thy verdict's cry,
Naming the fiend, that royally

Upon this house hath fed,
Fiend, that in darkness still doth brew
The blood-lust, craving drink anew
Ere the old wounds be bled!

CHORUS.

Dread is the seneschal
Whose grievous wrath thou tellest—
Ah me, an evil tale!
Inevitable doom of lust unsated.
Zeus, Zeus, of thee is all.
Thou rulest, thou compellest;
Else what can man avail?
Lo, all that is by heavenly will is fated!

O King, my lord the King,
How shall I weep for thee?
What message from the heart to bring
Of sorrowing fealty?
Low in the spider's toils thou liest
And foully reft thy life is waning.
Woe for thy bed of slavery,
The treacherous fate whereby thou diest,
The keen-edged blade thy life-blood draining,
O King, my lord the King!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Impute ye still the deed to me?
Falsely! For deem not that ye see
In me the dead man's wife.
Nay, veiled as Agamemnon's spouse
The old grim demon of the house

For the feast abhorred doth claim his price,
New blood for an ancient sacrifice,
For babes, a strong man's life.

CHORUS.

That thou art clean of guilt
What witness can assure us ?
Not so, not so ! Yet still
The demon grim may claim his part in the story.
Blood upon blood new-spilt—
Fierce Havoc tramples o'er us,
To wreak his righteous will
On kindred flesh, for feast of children gory !

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And foully reft thy life is waning.
Woe for thy bed of slavery,
The treacherous fate whereby thou diest,
The keen-edged blade, thy life-blood draining
O King, my lord the King !

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Yea, for the curse of treachery
Himself upon the house did lay.
He fares as he hath wrought !
Who from my love to death could tear
Iphigeneia, the child I bare—
Child of my tears ! Now by the sword
His life is drained, and the proud word
In Hell is brought to nought !

CHORUS.

Crazed are my wits : I strive in vain
To guide my whirling thought aright,
For the house reels before my sight,
And dreadful in mine ears, the rain
Upon the doomed roof falls, of blood,
No spattering drops now, but a flood :
And Destiny for some new deed of teen
On what new whetstone makes the blade of Justice keen ?

O earth, I would thou hadst received me dying
Ere on this sight mine eyes were bent,
My lord upon his last bed lowly lying,
Within these walls of silver pent !
Who now shall give him burial, who shall wail him ?
How shalt thou dare it, thou who slew thy lord ?
How shall thy graceless grace of tears avail him ?
Or deeds like thine be cancelled with a word ?
Who for a King great hearted
Shall blend with tears of ruth
The praise of the departed,
The homage of the truth ?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

'Tis not for thee these dues to heed,
For at my hand
He fell, he died, and he shall have his meed !
No mourners from his dwelling here !
Full surely there, with welcome cheer,
Upon the dolorous strand,

His daughter as in duty bound,
Iphigeneia right soon shall meet him,
And with a loving kiss shall greet him,
And fling her arms around!

CHORUS.

Herein my taunt with taunt is met,
And hard the issue to discern.
Behold the spoiler spoiled in turn,
The slayer ta'en in slaughterous net.
While God in heaven enthronèd reigns,
"Fare as ye wrought," His law remains.
Who then shall root from hence the seeds of hate,
Or loose the chains that bind this house unto its fate?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Yea, upon him it striketh home,
Thy wisdom: I
Would make a covenant with the ancestral Doom.
Most grievous though these troubles be,
To rest herein content, so he
Forth from this house may hie;
Some other home with crime to haunt!
For me sufficeth little store,
So that the madness rage no more,
The fiend of blood avaunt!

Enter AEGISTHUS *from the palace. His mien is that of a conqueror.*

AEGISTHUS.

Hail, gracious dawn of the day that brings me Right!
Now am I sure that, mortals to avenge,
The Gods of heaven look down on sins of earth.
For I have seen this man caught in the web

By vengeful spirits woven—a goodly sight—
To pay him for his sire's foul handiwork!
For Atreus, ruler of this land, his sire
Forth from the palace and the city drave
My sire Thyestes—plain to make my tale—
His brother, that had claimed his sovereignty:
Who came again, a suppliant to his hearth,
And won, poor dupe! such safety for his meed
As not to stain the ancestral home with blood,
There where he clung! For this man's cursed sire,
Atreus, with welcome glad for hatred's sake,
Feigning good cheer to celebrate good-will,
Served him—a banquet of his children's flesh!
The feet and hands, for the tell-tale fingers' cause
He kept close covered: of the rest, disguised,
A savoury dish he made, sitting apart,
And set before my sire; who took thereof
Unwitting, and did eat such food, as brought
Unto the house—what blessing ye have seen!
Then when he knew the abominable deed,
Back with a cry he staggered; spat forth flesh,
Called dark despairing doom on Pelops' line,
Dashed o'er the banquet with confederate foot
And prayed, "So fall the race of Pleisthenes!"
Therefore ye look upon this fallen corse;
And meet it is that I devised his death,
I, the third child, who yet in swaddling clothes
Was driven forth with mine unhappy sire,
Till justice brought me to my home, a man!
Yea, even from banishment I aimed at him,
And wove entire the scheme of this fell plot.
Wherefore I count it glorious even to die,
For that I see him fast in Justice' toils.

CHORUS.

Aegisthus, 'tis not seemly in thine eyes
To mock the fallen : and, for thou dost avow
Thy will to slay this man, thy brain alone
The author of this piteous tragedy,
I vow thou shalt not lack the people's curse,
Flung with their stones upon thy guilty head!

AEGISTHUS.

What, talk of mutiny on the lower deck ?
'Tis those above command the ship, not ye !
And chastisement is grievous for the old,
As ye shall learn, that will not be discreet!
Most eminent physicians ye shall find
Hunger and bonds, to cure old brains diseased !
Have ye not eyes, and can ye not perceive ?
Spurn not the goad, that wounds the spurning heel!

CHORUS.

Woman ! And was it thou, the adulterer,
That, lying in wait for men come home from war,
Didst plot to slay the captain of the host ?

AEGISTHUS.

More words for which thy tears anon shall pay !
How all unlike to Orpheus' tongue is thine !
The magic of his voice led all things captive,
But thou, with thy vain yelpings, dost provoke
Them that shall lead thee captive : yea, methinks
Chains shall induce a more submissive speech !

CHORUS.

And shalt thou play the tyrant over Argos?
Thou who, devising murder, didst not dare
With thine own hand to smite the victim down?

AEGISTHUS.

'Tis plain that to beguile was woman's work,
And the old feud made me a suspect still.
Howbeit, I will essay with this man's wealth
To rule the people: for the disobedient
The heavy yoke! No corn-fed trace-horse he!
Hunger, that ill consorts with wantonness,
Methinks shall yield him pliant to my will!

CHORUS.

Again, I ask, why, with thine heart envenomed,
Didst thou not kill him? Wherefore did a wife—
Polluting thus her country and its Gods—
Deal the death-blow? And doth Orestes live?
Shall not the kind Fates waft him home again
With triumph in his train, to slay this pair?

AEGISTHUS.

Nay, if so thou'lt have it, word and act, thou soon shalt see—
Ho, my trusty henchmen! Yours the instant task shall be!

CHORUS.

Ho, my comrades! Ready for the battle, hand on hilt!

AEGISTHUS.

Hand on hilt ye find me ready! Slay me if thou wilt!

CHORUS.

Slay ? the word thyself hast spoken from thy lips we take!

CLYTAEMNESTRA (*stepping between them, and laying her hand on* AEGISTHUS' *arm*).

Dearest, stay ! Enough of trouble ! More we must not make.
Even now a plenteous harvest we have reaped of woe.
Turn thee homeward without bloodshed : yea, ye elders, go
Hence, ere deeds awake disaster ; bear what fate hath sent !
Were the tale of woe concluded, I could rest content!
I have felt the foot of Fortune trample on my breast!
Such to you my woman's counsel. Hearken ye were best !

AEGISTHUS.

Nay, shall such defiance blossom on the idle tongue ?
Fate provoked, discretion flouted ? Mutiny be flung
At the ruler ?

CHORUS.

Ne'er shall Argos fawn to coward like thee!

AEGISTHUS.

Well, the hour shall come hereafter, and the penalty !

CHORUS.

Never, should the powers of Heaven Orestes homeward lead !

AEGISTHUS.

Exiles, starving on a shadow ! Well I know the breed

CHORUS.

Thine to batten on the substance! Thine the power indeed!

AEGISTHUS.

Know that thou shalt surely pay me for thy foolish prate!

CHORUS.

Bully, strut and bluster, like a cock before his mate!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Heed no more these idle howlings! Masters of the hall
Ruling thou and I together, we will govern all.

[*Exit, leading* AEGISTHUS.

FINIS.

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382.01 Aeschylus.
AESCHYLU

Agamemnon / by Aeschylus ;
translated by Rushworth Kennard Davis
— Oxford, Eng. : B. H. Blackwell,
1919.
x, 69 p. ; 20 cm.

I. Davis, Rushworth Kennard. II.
Title.

2375381

02/18/87

T5-CUT-011